THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

May 29, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church

Scripture
Proverbs 1:1-7
John 3:1-8

"The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes." -John 3:8 (RSV)

One of the hottest courses at Harvard this spring, according to the New York Times last Sunday, is not Marketing Analysis or The Art of Corporate Takeovers. It is **"Jesus and the Moral Life,"** taught by Harvey Cox, a Professor at the Divinity School who also lectures for the University. Last year a thousand students signed-up for the course. It was too large for any of Harvard's classrooms and had to be moved to a theater. This year Professor Cox has limited enrollment to 450. Everyone is stunned by this dramatic and rather sudden interest in religion at one of the brightest, best and most secular of our institutions of higher education. Some judge it harshly. Others are ecstatic. Most are puzzled. Cox himself is not sure why the course is popular except that students are clearly seeking ideas that will help them cope with an uncertain and frightening future.

One of Cox's colleagues sees the course as "learning a way to think about those issues that are pressing into the lives of students. They want to know what Western religious traditions have to say about life, death, career choices and work." [New York Times Magazine, 5/22/88]

More people than we realize, I think, turn to religion for intellectual reasons, for answers: for intelligent ways to think about life's tough questions: for a reasonable framework in which to live life. Not everybody finds it at a revival meeting or sitting in front of TV. Not everybody is content with the "try harder, look up and keep smiling" piety marketed with such consummate media skill. Some come to the Lord with a list of questions.

Nicodemus was one of them. A Pharisee, a well educated man. Successful. Substantial. A kind of lawyer. Reasonable, rational and prudent. So prudent that he comes to talk to Jesus at night. All that we ordinarily recall of that incident is that in Verse 16 the author of

the Fourth Gospel starts to editorialize a bit and writes one of the most memorable lines in all of literature: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." [John 3:16] That's not Jesus talking to Nicodemus. That's John preaching, addressing you and me.

What Jesus says to Nicodemus remains very much an enigma. Nicodemus opens the conversation with a lawyer-like observation that no one can do the things Jesus is doing unless God is with him. I think that's basically a question. "How do you do it, Jesus? Who are you anyhow?" Jesus doesn't answer but instead makes his own observation about the need to be born again in order to see the Kingdom. The interrogator cannot resist: "How can a man be born when he is old?" Again Jesus ignores the question, says some more about rebirth, and then these intriguing words -

> "The wind blows when it wills, and
> you hear the sound of it, and you do
> not know whence it comes or whither it
> goes; so it is with every one who is born
> of the Spirit." [John 3:8]

They talk some more in this strange way. John adds his editorial homily about God so loving the world and Nicodemus disappears until the end. Then we see him again, on the day of the crucifixion, after sundown, helping Joseph of Arimathea (another substantial man) carry the dead body of Jesus to Joseph's garden for burial.

I have always been intrigued with him. My assumption, based on nothing except my own imagination, is that Nicodemus continued to ask difficult questions. I see him always on the periphery of the moment, never going in, but always asking questions - "What does that mean? Could you clarify that?" And I've always imagined Jesus appreciating that, being irritated by it at times, by the necessity of clarifying what he said for Nicodemus; but actually respecting and loving him for it. I've always imagined Nicodemus' relationship to Jesus on this intellectual basis - growing in confidence, trust and intimacy - but never willing to let go of the lawyer's commitment to skeptical questioning, doubting, probing, in order to get at the truth. People like Nicodemus don't believe easily; don't join up without a real struggle, never act impetuously, don't allow passion to overrule reason. And so I've always been fascinated that he came to Jesus in the first place. The older I get, the more touched I am by his helping to carry the dead weight of his young friend to burial.

He came with a list of questions. So do a lot of people, I think. I did. What a wonderful surprise to discover that there are academic faculties subjecting religion to the same academic rigor, disciplined research, and intellectual criticism as happens at the Physics Department or the Medical School. What a wonderful surprise to discover professors whose vocation, practiced in a divinity school, is the same as professors of mathematics, literature and biology - the pursuit of truth. I like that discovery. I was not so happy about its corollary; namely, that religion does not always enjoy a reputation for truth-seeking, academic rigor and intellectual integrity. The memory of the discovery is still very much with me.

I came to the Divinity School (of the University of Chicago) fairly innocent of much academic religion. In college I had never declared myself openly as a pre-ministerial student, partially because I wasn't at all sure what I was, but also in part out of fear for what that might do to my social life. Neither did I experience much academic hostility to religion, other than one Economics professor who enjoyed a reputation as an eccentric atheist, who loved to badger and insult Campus Crusade for Christ types - who got very excited when he attacked their simple faith. I just kept showing up at the Presbyterian Church on an occasional Sunday morning - with my list of questions. "Is it true? How can it be? What does it mean?"

So I came under the cover of some darkness; I suppose like Nicodemus came to Jesus, discreetly, asking questions. I discovered immediately that everyone else seemed to have lots of opinions, liked to argue and quote authorities whose names I barely knew... Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth. I had read nothing by any of them. So on a Saturday morning, early in September, I decided to remedy the situation. I walked down 57th Street to a small book store, encountered a counter-culture type we used to call beatnik, with all the appropriate costuming and studied lack of grooming, and asked innocently if he had anything by Niebuhr, Tillich or Barth. He must have been lying in wait for me - sitting there since July, waiting for the first fresh twenty-one year old Divinity School student from Central Pennsylvania. He flew into a rage. I couldn't begin to repeat the language with which he told me what he thought of Neibuhr, Tillich and Barth, religion in general, and the Divinity School in particular... No, he didn't carry stuff like that, nor would any book seller interested in truth. Religion was childish, silly, and there was no reason why it would be present in a serious book store. I suppose I protested. What I remember is being shocked at the hostility and the open conflict, at least in his mind, between the intellectual rigor of the academic life and religion.

There is evidence that things are changing a little, and that religion is becoming a new and very respectable topic for rigorous inquiry. Nicodemus must be happy. I think Jesus is happy with it, too. But he was, please remember, if not negative, at least cautious with Nicodemus. He seemed to be warning Nicodemus that faith is not something that you can pin down, ultimately. Faith is not something you can learn like a list of vocabulary words. Rebirth - or faith - is like the wind. It comes from somewhere else. It is illusive. Sometimes you can feel it - sometimes you can't. It is not, that is to say, the same as a mathematical formula. Although even mathematics is not as precise and nailed down as we used to think.

Perhaps Jesus was anticipating the danger posed by the adherents of religion who have everything figured out. Perhaps he was warning Nicodemus, and us, that every time people are convinced that they have all the truth, it begins to make sense to them to use whatever means are necessary to convince others to adhere to that truth. That's the way the people thought who brought us the Inquisition; it's what Fundamentalists believe when they want to dictate what textbooks can be presented as science, or when fanatic Islamic fundamentalists throw themselves into Holy Wars.

I was reading an essay on the Male Aging Process (a topic in which I have something of a personal interest) by Pete Hamill, who describes his own determined and intentional secularism - at the age of 52.

"Any truly conscious middle-aged American must recognize that belief is the great killer of the century. Political belief has slaughtered millions. Religious belief has slaughtered the rest. 'Agree with me or die' has been the essential slogan of the believers, at home and abroad, and you could fill every line of every page of every newspaper in the world with the names of the victims and still not have enough room. And yet we cannot seem ever to get free of them; charlatans pose as wise men; hustlers offer themselves as redeemers... So in middle age I am permanently secular." ["The Best Is Yet To Be?" Pete Hamill, Esquire, June 1988]

How very sad that is - because one of our oldest religious traditions has to do with wisdom. In a recent article, a Brown University professor suggests that the uniqueness of the Judeo/Christian tradition is that in it intelligence is celebrated. Its holy literature contains attempts to explain creation and history, to put down in writing everything that is known. Wisdom is honored, not physical strength, sexual prowess, military might. But wisdom. The wise person is one who knows, understands, sees clearly - and has the practical knowledge to live in harmony with nature, and in peace and justice with neighbors.

So the tradition has always encouraged the life of the mind. Learning has been honored in Judaism through the centuries. In the ghettoes - even in the extermination camps - there were poetry reading groups, writers' workshops, chamber music. We Christians enjoy that legacy. The early Christians ended up on top of the Roman Empire, someone observed, because they had all the brains; they out-thought everybody. The Gospel of Christ attracted the best minds in the world. In our particular corner of the church, Calvinism has always celebrated academic discipline, and has been a consistent proponent of public education and academic freedom. Our forbears started colleges everywhere they went - from Princeton to Lafayette, Waynesburg, Wooster, Hanover, Lake Forest, Monmouth.

But the undercurrent of the conflict, I discovered that September Saturday, continues. Utterly convinced that it had the whole truth, the church took on Copernicus and Galileo and, of course, Charles Darwin. Misguided religionists continue to oppose open scientific inquiry, to ask adherents to leave their intellect outside the church door, like so many umbrellas in the umbrella stand, and to prove the old stereotype of religious faith as "trying to believe what you know to be untrue."

The students at Harvard are discovering, I think, that the world needs something the Judeo/Christian tradition calls wisdom. "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord" - the ancient Scripture reads. What do you suppose that means? It is not fright, terror. It is awe, reverence. It is the suggestion that wisdom begins with the acknowledgement that there is truth beyond my limited ability to understand it. Wisdom begins with modesty before God, or at least before that which I do not know. Wisdom begins - where religion begins - with a confession that I don't know

everything and have everything: a confession of inadequacy, emptiness and need. Learning starts when an individual confesses that someone else has what he or she does not have.

The most eloquent proponent of that position continues to be a scientist, Lewis Thomas, head of the Sloane Kettering Cancer Clinic and popular author. In all his essays Thomas writes about wonder, bewilderment and awe before the magnificent mystery of life. What we do best is "learn," Thomas says.

One of my favorite Thomas quotes (and I have a lot of favorites) is this -

> "The only solid piece of scientific truth about which I feel totally confident is that we are profoundly ignorant about nature. Indeed, I regard this as the major discovery of the past hundred years of biology... We are, at last, facing up to it. In earlier times, we either pretended to understand how things worked, or ignored the problem, or simply made up stories to fill the gap."
> [The Medussa and the Snail, p. 58]

So maybe science can teach us something that we have forgotten: that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; or at least reverence before the mysteries we do not understand.

The best scientists know that. Albert Einstein was not traditionally religious, but he did say once:

> "Religion without science is blind.
> Science without religion is lame."

At a time when it is possible to blow up the world by accident, the ancient wisdom of the Bible looks very good. We have the technological capability to blow up, burn, gas, poison, infect everybody in the world. So do other nations. So will many other nations in the very near future. We are in the process of killing the fish in our oceans, depriving the ecosystem of the rain forests it must have to manufacture oxygen; and we are apparently burning holes in the atmosphere. Our technology has outrun our wisdom. We can do more things than we know how to do right.

The poet Shelley said that a long time ago --

> "...we have more scientific and economic knowledge than can be accommodated. We want the creative faculty to imagine: our calculations have outrun our conceptions."

The optimist in me wants to see the renewed interest in religion as evidence that the human race is waking up to the graveness of our situation. The optimist in me wants to regard the Holocaust as a life-giving reminder, that knowledge is not the equivalent of goodness; that

technological skill is as capable of killing us as it is of saving us. I am comforted by a recent report that our Military Academies, for instance, are teaching poetry, history and English, along with engineering: that 30% to 40% of the graduates major in the liberal arts. I'm comforted by those bright Harvard students sitting at feet of Harvey Cox. The world needs wisdom that begins somewhere in the vicinity of the fear of the Lord.

Our city does too. We could use a dose of balance, modesty, and practical truth-telling. We desperately need political wisdom that is not arrogant and impetuous. Someone has to be wise enough to say that racism is wrong; that we struggled, sacrificed and died a little to move away from the institutional racism of the past - because we knew it was wrong. And so it is still wrong - whether its perpetrators are White or Black - whether its victims are Blacks, Jews, Hispanics, or whoever. If the fear of the Lord is where wisdom begins, then this city needs nothing so much as for its wise citizens to stop tolerating racism in any form.

I believe the students at Harvard are on to something as old as the Bible. I think they know that we are not as secular as we once thought we were; that we are not wise if we don't acknowledge our own modesty; and if we can't affirm a full-blown faith in God, wisdom, intelligence and historic necessity dictate acknowledging that there is a lot about life that remains a mystery. I think the Harvard students are learning what Proverbs knew thousands of years ago - that one of the paths to God, to ultimate truth, is through that list of questions each person carries around in his or her heart.

Where did we come from?

What is life all about?

What happens when we die?

Dan Wakefield, in his wonderful new book, Returning, a Spiritual Journey, concludes by observing that our culture seems to be newly opening to religion in general and, in particular, to the truth and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

He cites a speech made at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York recently by George Trow. Mr. Trow said, "I believe that humans are unable to live without some contact with what I call the third parent: God." Catholic theologian David Tracy observes that "More has been written about Jesus in the last twenty years than in the previous two thousand." And then there is that ultimate confession by a burned-out member of the Me-Generation: "Once you've played all the tennis you can play, what then?" [Wakefield, p. 248]

So we come here - each of us I think, at least in part - like Nicodemus came to Jesus, intellectually curious, with our list of questions.

"What does it all mean? Is there a God? Is Jesus for real? Does religion have anything to do with the real world? What shall I do with the rest of my life?"

It is all right to ask these questions. The good news is that you don't have to have it all figured out before you can be a friend of Jesus. The Gospel of Christ invites these questions - urges them in fact - as an expression of your personhood, your integrity.

Jesus entered the dialogue, encouraged Nicodemus, became a partner in the search. Nicodemus continued and at the end, having become wise, having learned to trust, stepped forward, declared himself, and loyally and lovingly stayed with Jesus in death.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," is the way it was put thousands of years ago. I commend it to you. Amen.